

VZCZCXRO6465
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHDM #0210/01 0871754
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 271754Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4777
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 5503

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000210

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/25/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: SARG PLAYS ARAB UNITY CARD ON EVE OF ARAB SUMMIT

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, American Embassy Damascus, Reasons 1
.4 b and d.

11. (C) Summary: With last minute changes still a possibility and Jordan's representation up in the air, the SARG claims it will receive up to 12 heads of state, despite evidence to the contrary. In response to Egypt and Saudi Arabia's decision to downgrade significantly their representation and Lebanon's decision not to send anyone, Syrian FM Muallem singled out these countries in a March 26 press conference for missing a "golden opportunity" to address Lebanon and other issues. Muallem also announced that Yemeni President Ali Abdallah Saleh would be presenting a summary of the recent discussions between Hamas and Palestinian Authority officials in Sanaa. Most of our contacts still believe Syria will not push to withdraw from or alter the 2002 Arab League Peace Initiative or come up with a new proposal on Lebanon. Syrian officials are nonetheless trying to draw attention to Israeli behavior as evidence of its rejection of the Arab peace initiative, while local media is portraying the low-level representation of Egypt and Saudi Arabia and absence of Lebanon as a betrayal of these countries' support of Arab causes in favor of U.S. interests. End Summary

Saudi and Egyptian "Insult" to the SARG

12. (C) As of COB March 27, the Syrians were claiming that up to 12 Arab heads of state would attend the summit. Information from other posts suggests the turnout will be lower. Press and diplomatic contacts were somewhat surprised by Saudi Arabia's March 24 decision to send its Arab League ambassador instead of FM Saud al Faisal as its delegation head. Attendees at a March 25 Greek National Day reception gossiped openly about how the SARG had taken this gesture as an overt insult. Al Hayat correspondent Ibrahim Hamidi and other journalists confided that regime insiders were visibly upset at the news and that MFA officials were accusing the Saudis of "surrendering the sword of Arab solidarity" to visiting Vice President Cheney.

13. (C) Viewed as equally insulting was Egypt's March 26 announcement that a junior Minister of State would be representing Cairo's delegation. This move so angered the Syrians that they reportedly stripped all delegations without a head of state of the right to speak at the summit's plenary session and denied Saudi and Egyptian attendees' access to the villa reserved for Egyptian President Mubarak and Saudi King Abdallah, according to an Egyptian Embassy contact. Samir al-Taki, head of the Orient Center and an MFA advisor, told us last week that a last ditch effort by an Emirati and Qatari delegation had failed to convince Syria to support the election of consensus Lebanese presidential candidate Sleiman. Many in the MFA were predicting a snub by the Saudis and Egyptians, he said. In a subsequent conversation,

al Taki relayed that the low level of the Saudi and Egyptian delegations represented a new nadir in inter-Arab relations. He expected the SARG to turn the tables by playing up the importance of Arab unity in the face of Israeli and U.S. challenges to the region.

14. (C) The Turkish Embassy confirmed Ankara would send the MFA's Secretary General instead of FM Babacan. Iranian FM Mottaki is still planning to attend. We have heard from various contacts that local non-Arab ambassadors will be invited to the inaugural session. The British and French are unlikely to attend, according to their embassies.

Discussion on The Arab Peace Initiative

15. (C) Hamidi told us March 25 that there had been a heated corridor exchange among some Arab League ambassadors who met March 25-26 after some unnamed Syrians apparently suggested modifying the 2002 Arab League initiative. However, FM Muallem announced in a March 26 press conference that the summit would not seek to alter or withdraw the 2002 initiative, but that Arab countries should re-examine their peace strategy toward Israel in light of Israeli behavior. Muallem elaborated on these remarks during his brief March 27 statement before Arab Foreign Ministers, saying that Israel's continued settlement expansion and actions in Gaza required the Arab countries to "examine alternatives to the peace strategy in the future." An Egyptian Embassy contact judged Muallem's words as "empty talk" and said most delegations favored maintaining the Arab peace initiative. But he warned some delegations would likely support condemnations of Israel. According to Hamidi, the final summit communique

DAMASCUS 00000210 002 OF 002

would not likely depart from the core Arab League position, but there had been discussions on March 27 among some foreign ministers about possible language alleging Israel's "rejection" of the 2002 Arab initiative.

Yemeni Initiative

16. (C) Press contacts report Syria assured the Yemeni delegation that President Saleh would be given the summit floor to brief other leaders on recent discussions in Sanaa between Fatah and Hamas. Reuters correspondent Khalid Oweiss told us the Yemenis were actively trying to arrange a meeting between PA President Abbas and Hamas Politburo chief Khalid Meshal on the margins of the summit. The PA representatives had reportedly resisted the idea, but many other delegations were openly praising the Yemeni initiatives. Most Arab countries supported the talks and would not oppose such a meeting, Oweiss assessed. However, he had heard from PA contacts that Abu Mazen would probably seek to avoid a meeting with Meshal by departing immediately after the March 29 opening session of the summit on the pretext that he had scheduled a meeting with Secretary Rice later the same day. Most contacts said it was unlikely that discussion of the Yemeni initiative would go beyond the Yemeni presentation, given the absence of the Saudis and Egyptians.

Lebanon

17. (C) Press and diplomatic contacts remain convinced there would be little movement on Lebanon during the summit. FM Muallem's March 27 remarks stressed that Lebanon's problems were internal, and he urged Egypt and Saudi Arabia to press March 14 leaders to support national reconciliation efforts. Hamidi told us that March 27 discussions by Arab foreign ministers were reportedly brief and focused on supporting the Arab League initiative. Our Egyptian Embassy contact told us

March 26 that Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab countries were considering steps to further marginalize the Damascus summit, including the idea of holding an emergency Arab League Ministerial after the summit to address the Lebanon issue. Syria's position remained fixed and unlikely to move anytime soon, either during or after the summit, Samir al-Taki stressed to us. He believed that Syria stood to gain a great deal by showing flexibility and a willingness to cooperate with Iraq on security and economic issues. The ongoing conflict between Iraqi forces and the Mahdi Army would probably rule out Iraqi PM Maliki's attendance, though some progress might be possible with the Iraqi delegation. Lebanon, however, "was stuck" and not likely to move anytime soon, he said.

18. (C) Comment: Syrian contacts are privately admitting that the absence of Saudi, Jordanian, and Egyptian leaders has dealt a blow to Bashar's prestige and has given many Syrians who are occupied with price hikes and economic woes another reason to question the regime's competence. Still, the majority of our contacts believe that Bashar enjoys overwhelming domestic support for his stance on Lebanon and Palestinian issues, even if many Syrians wonder why Damascus appears at odds with traditional Sunni allies. Several contacts have told us that Bashar's summit remarks are likely to acknowledge rifts within the Arab world, while emphasizing the ability of Arab leaders to rise above them. Despite Bashar's pique about the low-level of Saudi and Egyptian delegations, Damascus will declare the summit a success. If Muallem's March 27 remarks are a harbinger of Syrian interventions during the summit, Bashar could be willing to take the high road and avoid open controversy. However, the Syrian media will likely beat the pan-Arab drum for weeks to come.
CORBIN